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INTRODUCTION

Guest Editor's Introduction: Racism Alive and Well

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I want to thank the editorial board of *Foucault Studies* for allowing me this opportunity to solicit, review, and offer its readers these papers on Foucault and race. As this volume shows, Foucault's work still has largely unexploited resources for thinking about race and racism in the present day, despite their author's having passed from the scene twenty-five years ago. They form a rich field for critical race theorists. Likewise, Foucault scholars who are not critical race theorists have much to gain from close attention to the ways that race threads through even the work that focuses primarily on other themes.

I sit down to write this introduction one day after participating in a large civil protest against the economic policies of US House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (Republican, Virginia)—currently infamous for his obstructionism during the debt ceiling debates in early August and for his demand for cuts in spending to pay for disaster relief in the aftermath of the August 23 earthquake (centered just 35 miles west of Richmond) and Hurricane Irene (which devastated parts of Virginia and New England). This week Representative Cantor released his twelve-point plan to create jobs, which would have been laughable had he been anyone other than a powerful lawmaker, its most reiterated feature being elimination of government regulation of business, including the abolition of the Environmental Protection Agency. Somehow Cantor believes—or at least believes his constituents will believe—that tax breaks to wealthy individuals and corporations and an end to government monitoring of big business will cause jobs to appear in an economy where demand for goods and services is low and in many sectors falling. But what does any of this have to do with Foucault or race?

First, race. Eric Cantor “represents” the Seventh Congressional District of Virginia, which includes about half the state capital city of Richmond and stretches northwest toward the Shenandoah Valley. As House Majority Leader, he styles himself “Obama’s Nemesis,” a role he played with gusto in the struggle over raising the US debt ceiling to enable the country to pay its creditors. It is very clear, however, that Cantor has no intention of representing residents of his district. In the ten years he has “served” in Congress, he has seldom held constituent meetings of any kind. I personally know constituents who have tried to get meetings with him in either his Glen Allen or Culpepper offices for ten years without success. During this past August’s recess, when representatives traditionally check in with constituents regarding pressing issues, Cantor has held no town hall meetings; his only appearances “in public”

have been in campaign events closed to all but supporters and announced only on the Virginia Tea Party website.

Constituents who are unemployed, underemployed, disabled, retired, or just plain angry at Cantor's posturing and obstructionism have had enough. When someone discovered on the Tea Party website that he was holding what he calls an "Advisory Council" meeting on August 31 at a Richmond hotel, a number of area advocacy groups, including Virginia Organizing with which I volunteer, began making arrangements to get constituents usually excluded into that meeting. Their primary concern was jobs, but they also planned to talk with him about his stand on disaster relief, social security, and the debt ceiling.

Getting in was tough. First, a constituent had to register for the Advisory Council on Cantor's campaign website—*not* his congressional website. No announcement of the August 31 meeting could be found even on the campaign site, however; registrants were told to wait for emails telling them of local events. As it turned out, no emails ever came, so if people did not know of the August 31 meeting from some other source, membership on the Advisory Council was useless as an avenue for talking to their representative. After waiting a few days, some people called the campaign headquarters and said they had seen on the Tea Party website that there was an event on August 31. Those people were told they could attend, although still no email confirmation was sent. No others were ever notified or advised to call the campaign headquarters for event details. There was also no notification to the press. One cannot help but believe that Cantor was deliberately excluding ordinary constituents and acting to insure a homogeneous and supportive audience.

One of the organizing partner groups rented a hotel ballroom above the ballroom that Cantor had rented for his Advisory Council meeting. The plan was to gather there, prepare, and then go downstairs as a group and ask to be seated in the Advisory Council meeting. (Our groups did notify the press, which showed up in force for a rare chance to talk to Cantor.) However, one hour before the event, hotel employees entered our rented ballroom, evicted the occupants, and locked the doors, saying the contract on the room had been cancelled. Then the entire group was ushered across the street by a large number of police and refused further admittance to the hotel altogether. Police then began stopping cars arriving at the hotel and refusing parking to those who were not registered Cantor invitees or hotel guests. Eventually about 250 people who had been denied entrance gathered outside and began chanting "Jobs Now!"

According to the fifteen or so non-Tea Party people who got inside Cantor's meeting, there were about 450 in attendance, of which five were people of color (all affiliated with one of our partner groups). Outside, by contrast, about half the protestors were African American. Inside, Cantor took a total of five questions, not one from a person of color. Outside, all the chant leaders and many of those who participated in the subsequent Speak Out were African American. It was clear which constituents Cantor was interested in listening to and which not. And there was another stark contrast: Most of the hotel staff who served food and drink at Cantor's event—his people's docile servants—were black, while all of the well-armed police outside were white.

Cantor began his remarks by thanking those gathered, including the Chesterfield County Sheriff whose presence was highlighted, for removing the jobs protestors from hotel

property. Nevertheless, in an interview with press afterward, Cantor insisted that his event was “open to the public.”

Clearly, Obama’s self-proclaimed “nemesis” is a proud and very arrogant white man, and a white man who continues to use racism to further his political career and enhance his already significant personal fortune. Racism is alive and well in US politics today.

As vice-chair of Virginia Organizing—and as white and well dressed as I could manage—I stood in the lobby of that hotel for as long as I was allowed to, trying to redirect our people who thought they were supposed to meet upstairs in our by-then locked ballroom. For much of that time five or six well-dressed black women, all senior citizens, sat on a sofa behind me, hoping the police would let the excluded constituents come back to the hotel so that they would not have to walk the long distance across the lot and street to add their voices to the protest. From that vantage point, I watched Cantor’s “guests” enter the hotel—white, mostly elderly, and mostly unnerved by the black presence, however well-dressed and well-behaved, behind me. Racism is alive and well in North American daily life today.

And Foucault? What does Foucault have to contribute to anti-racist discourses and practices an ocean away from and a quarter century beyond the scene of his own intellectual and political life? How can a decades-dead white Frenchman help us now? The papers in this special issue do not by any means give a complete answer, but they point in some important directions. All five papers are concerned, directly or indirectly, with resistance to dominant configurations of power.

José Medina takes up the theme of racial resistance directly in his essay “Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology of Resistance: Counter-Memory, Epistemic Friction, and *Guerilla* Pluralism.” He begins by mounting a careful examination of Foucault’s own account of how resistance occurs through insurrections of “subjugated knowledges.” Medina then draws on the work of Nancy Tuana, Charles Mills, and Shannon Sullivan to produce an alliance between constructions of epistemologies of ignorance, especially “white ignorance,” and Foucault’s analyses of racial and sexual power/knowledge formations.

The central epistemological issue for Medina is the question of epistemic pluralism. He illuminates this issue by contrasting Foucault’s work with that of American pragmatists, who, like Foucault, embrace epistemic pluralism. C. S. Peirce presents us with what Medina calls a “converging pluralism.” As we gain experience, our different perspectives tend to converge toward unification. William James offers a “melioristic pluralism” where differences remain but cooperation can take place. Foucault embraces pluralism itself, Medina argues, for both its epistemic and its political value. Differences produce friction, and friction enables critique. Effective resistance to dominant racial configurations depends on a Foucaultian “*guerilla* pluralism,” Medina argues.

Brad Elliott Stone argues for the importance of heterotopic space for resistance to dominant social forms, sexuality in particular. Drawing on the work of James Baldwin, Stone shows that there are multiple interstices within social space where contradictory identities and values can co-exist in mutual- and self-disruption. Foucault’s work shows us that race and sexuality are strategies of biopower, not definitive and unchanging realities, but effective resistance requires not only disruption of concepts but also disruptive practices that must occur

in real space among real bodies. He argues, against the grain of much popular discourse, that the Down Low, as heterotopic space, can be understood as a material region of resistance.

Falguni Sheth sees Foucault's work on race and biopolitics as importantly limited and argues that we must understand those limits in order to use his work effectively. Muslim-hating, she asserts, is not captured or explained in the domain of biopolitics, yet it is increasingly prevalent in our society. She offers numerous examples to show that Muslims caught in various discriminatory, violent, and hideously unjust governmental and local actions are not unified by national origin, ethnicity, skin color, or sex; in other words, there is nothing biological about the category of the Hated Muslim. Yet the category exists as a segmentation of our population, and it must be resisted. Only by understanding contemporary racism in terms broader than biopolitical analysis allows can we comprehend this emerging and intensifying political formation. Sheth proposes supplementing Foucault's account of biopower with what she calls "ontopolitics," an analysis of how ontological categories (often moral or religious in genesis) are created and deployed. Her central, although perhaps still preliminary, contention is that networks of biopower generate non-biological strategies, ontopolitical strategies, as a means of self-defense—not defense of a population, but defense of the regime itself. Resistance to such biopolitical regimes will thus require both biopolitical and ontopolitical analysis and action.

My essay, "Decapitating Power," takes up the issue of the context of Foucault's genealogy of racism in *"Society Must Be Defended."* I assert that the value of Foucault's genealogy in those lectures is not so much his analysis of racism but, rather, in the stress his analysis puts on the model of power as war. First, using Thomas Jefferson's writings as an example, I critique the idea that race war discourse did not transmute into and give way to racism until the emergence of biology and evolutionary thinking in the nineteenth century. Then I turn to the issue of power per se. Foucault was struggling throughout the lecture series to rid himself of a sovereign conception of power by way of exploring and developing a conception of power as warfare. The lectures are in that sense experimental. I suggest that the experiment failed in that the model of warfare ultimately did not provide a satisfactory account of the mechanisms and functions of power that commanded Foucault's attention, but it succeeded in that out of it emerged a new direction for thinking power without a head or center. Contrary to Pasquale Pasquino, I argue that Foucault's concept of governmentality is not simply a reworking of power as war but is in fact a new, and decapitated, understanding of power, different from both sovereignty and disciplinary normalization and biopower.

Finally, Mary Beth Mader's essay, "Modern Living and Vital Race: Foucault and the Science of Life," examines Foucault's claim that the concept of life enters history and science only in the modern period, functioning as the matrix that holds together and accounts for the emergence and appearance of and relations among living entities, whereas in the classical age nature was conceptually unified by tabular continuity. It is life's entry that sets the conditions for, and in some senses even demands, a new configuration of race and a new kind of racism, a biological racism. Mader questions the stark distinction that Foucault draws between the temporality of biology and the atemporality of sciences preceding it. She finds notions of emergence, genesis, and movement on both sides of this alleged historical and discursive divide. The problematic—conceptual and political—that Mader identifies is that of thinking

“human generative relations,” by which she means not only biological and genetic affinities but more broadly the connections, relations, and practices that generate human beings as persons and community members. After all, it is within these relations and practices that racial, gender, and sexual oppression take place. The issue for Foucaultian philosophers of science and critical race theorists, she insists, is not that evolutionary thinking ushers in temporal or genealogical conceptions of human filiation, but rather that it alters existing conceptions and practices considerably, and it is crucial to understand how that alteration occurs and what it does. What we need, Mader concludes, is a philosophical ontology of genealogy. From this perspective, one can more fruitfully approach the issue of race in our society today.

All five of these philosophers see great value in Foucault’s work not only as a means of analyzing contemporary configurations of racial power but also as a means of practicing resistance. As Eric Cantor’s and so many other public officials’ conduct over economic aid and disaster relief, health care and immigration, corporate tax breaks and threats to social security demonstrate daily, racism is alive and well in our world, and countless lives depend on finding effective paths and tools of resisting, combatting, and ending it.

Addendum: Press coverage of the August 31, 2011, protest

From the *Richmond Times Dispatch*:

<http://www2.timesdispatch.com/news/virginia-politics/2011/aug/31/2/protestors-voice-desire-for-jobs-and-fru-13340-vi-30251/>

From the Richmond, VA, NBC News affiliate:

<http://www.nbc12.com/link/347753/decisionvirginia?redirected=true>

From the Richmond, VA, CBS News affiliate:

<http://www.wtvr.com/news/wtvr-eric-cantor-protest-holiday-inn,0,6235587.story>

From the *Daily Kos*:

<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/09/01/1012506/-Police-remove-Eric-Cantor-protesters-from-a-hotel-ballroom-they-rented>

From Blue Virginia:

<http://bluevirginia.us/diary/4770/video-cantors-constituents-kicked-out-rally-in-parking-lot-to-demand-action-on-jobs>

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